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Climbing The Wall

“Strength is a matter of a made-up mind.”

-Anonymous

Glistening with sweat, an Iron Man triathlete completes his 141 mile endeavor and crosses the finish line. Most spectators assume that the event was only physically taxing, but an athlete empathizes, knowing the real struggle occurred in the one place that cannot be observed by the human eye; the mind. The Iron Man triathlon is the epitome of an athletic competition, because it not only demands for participants to be in unparalleled physical condition, but also to maintain an intrepid resolution through 2.4 miles of swimming, 112 miles of cycling, and 26.2 miles of running. These athletes, akin to track and cross country athletes, know the potential of the “made-up mind”, because they know all of their training and preparation is futile if they do not have the willpower to push through “The Wall”.

I’ve been involved with track and cross country since the 2011 track season, and I have yet to participate in a race without encountering The Wall. From the less lengthy events, such as the 400 meter dash and 800 meter run, to the more extensive races, such as the 1600 meter run and 5000 meter run, The Wall remains a permanent fixture in my mind. The Wall is a metaphorical boundary that exists solely within the mind, but it is rather enigmatic. This wall does not only prevent an athlete from exerting his or her mental force further, but also, as time elapses and fatigue increases, acquires a voice and attempts to dissuade him or her from optimizing performance in the competition. The response to this barrier facilitates differentiation between the typical person and the athlete. The athlete, in the pursuit of glory that can only be obtained from competition, would surmount the mental barrier, deafen his or her ears to its Siren-like voice, and proceed confidently to triumph. Contrarily, the typical person would be more likely to admit defeat and concede victory, having been deterred by The Wall.

This mental barrier does not exist solely in the heat of competition. I found myself facing The Wall every day of the first week in summer, which I spent preparing for the 2011 cross country season. I can still recall the agony of rising from slumber early in the morning to run 5 or 6 miles. I can recall the torment both my legs and lungs endured as my jogging shoes struck the pavement golf cart paths. I can even recall the consuming an inestimable quantity of water to stay hydrated. But what I remember most, the thing that really protrudes from my memory about those jogging sessions, was learning to climb The Wall. I would look at the varsity athletes and wonder, “How do they make it look so easy?”. I knew that they had gather much more experience from past, but could not understand what knowledge was gathered during those hours of practice that I lacked. The answer to my query remained elusive until, during one of my jogging sessions, I saw a child sitting in a tree. The moment I saw her, a wave of realization washed over me, and I finally understood. It was not that varsity athletes no longer had to climb The Wall; they had simply grown accustomed to doing so, in the same manner that a child would learn how to climb a tree or ride a bicycle.

Through the triumphs and defeats I have experienced in track and cross country, I have come to realize that true strength is not acquired by weight-lifting or any other form of bodybuilding. No, true strength is determination to defend your principles, achieve your goals, and engage in all desired pursuits of this life.